

A scientist in wonderland

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Ernst E. *A Scientist in Wonderland: A Memoir of Searching for Truth and Finding Trouble*. Exeter: imprint-academia.com, 2015, ISBN-13: 978-1845407773, 174 pp., £14.95 pbk.

This is a book of two halves: the making of a man and the breaking of a man.

Even as a young boy, Edzard Ernst was looking for trouble and finding it. Some might therefore dismiss him as a man seeking controversy for its own sake by way of attention seeking, but that would be completely missing the point. Ernst grew up in Germany in the early years immediately in the wake of the destruction of the ‘Third Reich’ by the allies. His memoirs start by describing how it felt to grow up knowing that virtually all of his parents’ generation to one degree or another were complicit with the Nazis in the conduct of the holocaust, and as the engineers of the massive destruction he witnessed in the rubble surrounding him. In reaction to this precocious awareness, he distrusted and despised his seniors and saw no reason to respect their dictates and admonitions. So right from the start he was in conflict with authority and that is one of the *leitmotifs* of this very readable memoir. As a young man he was not interested in his studies and it never entered his head that he wanted to study medicine. All he wanted to do was to play jazz and earn his living as a musician. With constant interruptions to make time for gigs and womanising, he drifted into studying psychology in Munich. In spite of a disjointed and fractured education, and in response to family pressure that wanted a doctor in the family who would eventually take over the family business of running rehabilitation clinics, he eventually enrolled in medical school having lost patience with the pseudo-science that filled much of the curriculum in the department of psychology. He still was not happy by the didactic style of teaching but conceded that however boring, facts must be accumulated in order to practise as a doctor.

Ernst’s career development was difficult to chart. Somehow or other he mutated from being a junior doctor in a hospital that advocated homeopathy to chairman of a very large department of rehabilitation medicine in the prestigious main teaching hospital in

Vienna. Along the way, as well as challenging received wisdom at each step, alienating all those in authority, he found the time to carry out serious scientific research and to build a prodigious bibliography.

About half way through the book Professor Ernst makes a surprising decision.

He applies for the first chair of ‘Complementary (read alternative) Medicine’ in the UK that was to be based in an academic backwater of a postgraduate department at the University of Exeter. It is difficult to understand his motives at the time but he had an enduring love for England out of early experiences in our green and pleasant land, he was fed up with all the intrigue and backbiting in Vienna but, most of all, he saw the challenge in opening up the subject of alternative medicine to the critical thinking of a now dyed in the wool scientific sceptic with a sense of his own destiny. The rest as they say is history and has already been covered in detail in the broadsheets like *The Times* and the tabloids like the *Daily Mail*. In short, as a scientist he believed in controlled experimentation, while his patrons believed in anecdotal evidence. He and his loyal team published hundreds of clinical trials and systematic reviews that failed dismally to corroborate the beliefs of virtually all practices outside conventional medicine. Inevitably, this led to a bitter clash with his sponsors and, retells Ernst, some unseemly behaviour of the senior academic staff at the university, who to their everlasting shame bowed to the pressure that ultimately snuffed out the most prolific unit of those researching the claims of the proponents of alternative medicine. (The influence of the Prince of Wales in this story has already been detailed as the headline in all the reviews published so far.) Effectively, what he describes is a clash of ideologies, faith-based systems versus the logic of scientific discovery.

Homeopathy provides a good example. Ernst explains that to believe in homeopathy takes a huge dose of cognitive dissonance. Finally, he learns the hard way that it is futile to debate with ideological bigots.

As if to reinforce this message there is a chilling Coda at the end of the book.

Edzard Ernst's other academic interests were to expose the complicity of the German medical establishment in the Nazi's atrocities. He points out that Hitler and his henchman advocated vegetarianism, 'natural medicines', homeopathy and physical fitness regimens, as a consequence of their ideology.

This is a deeply moving and deeply disturbing book yet written with a light touch, humour and self-deprecation.

Declarations

Competing interest: None declared

Funding: None declared

Ethical approval: Not applicable

Guarantor: MB

Contributorship: Single author

Acknowledgements: None

Provenance: Not commissioned

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February 2013 : Volume 1 : Issue 1
ISSN 2050-6406 (Print) : ISSN 2050-6414 (Online)

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